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Crisis in the humanities?

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Quad 136

Crisis in the Humanities?

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Crisis in the Humanities?

An interesting article in the *New York Times* recently on the future of the humanities in higher education. The [30 October article](#), entitled, “As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry” is part of a more general concern in higher education about the future of the humanities. A recent American Academy of Arts and Sciences [report](#) argued for the importance of the humanities and social sciences in public life.

(For those not steeped in academic lingo, the humanities are usually defined as the fields of ancient and modern languages, literature, philosophy, theology or religion, visual and performing arts and usually history. The social sciences include economics, political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology, and sometimes history.)



Photo: Paul Middlestaedt

As we strive to create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation, the humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic—a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the deals we hold in common.

The AAAS report notwithstanding, the real concerns in higher education revolve around the humanities. The social sciences have remained vibrant and popular with students. No one is arguing that economics is not an important subject for an educated person to study. There are questions sometimes raised about the need for philosophy or literature.

At good liberal arts schools, places whose educational philosophy is based on the belief in a broad-based, holistic education, these debates seems less pressing. While the number of students majoring in humanities may not be what they once were, distribution requirements almost always include a good dose of humanities and most students meet these requirements with little grumbling and often with real pleasure. They choose such institutions because they understand that humanistic perspectives are an essential part of becoming educated and that the humanities can help them think critically, understand other perspectives and communicate well, in addition to helping them find meaning in their own lives.

At religiously oriented schools, the case for the humanities is even easier to make. Catholic and Protestant schools were typically founded, in part, to train priests and ministers. Even the greatest secular institutions like the Ivies, Cambridge and Oxford, have strong religious roots. At such institutions, students rarely doubt the value of theology and philosophy.

For institutions and students with a more vocational focus, it may well be that the case for the humanities is harder to make, but at most of the best educational institutions in this country, those historically grounded in the humanities and still deeply committed to the liberal arts, there is no crisis.

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